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ABSTRACT

This report deals with the philosophy behind the Liverpool Educational Priority Area Project, a program of adult education for working class persons, and describes two of the programs in detail. Education in an EPA needs to be relevant, grounded in real problems and situations, and the emphasis should be on involvement and discovery. The first experiment in community involvement described succeeded because of the initiative of the local people using their skills and experiences to set up their own community center. The other program went a step further in that as the residents became more involved, they reached the point where they felt they needed something of a more formal educational nature. The challenge that these innovative types of adult education present to the Workers' Educational Association is described. (CL)

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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An Experiment in Adult Education in the EPA

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The adult education movement in this country has never successfully tackled the problem of education for working class communities. This is particularly true of that section of the working class to be found in E P A's – unskilled and semi-skilled workers suffering from a wide range of economic, social and educational deprivation. Certainly the WEA and some of the University Extra-Mural Departments have succeeded in recent years in greatly extending their work with the Trade Union movement – mainly courses of a vocational nature for shop stewards – but it is generally accepted that those attending these classes are something of an elite amongst the working class. In fact, it is extremely doubtful if the adult education movement *ever* attracted students from the lower working class.

The reasons for this failure are complex and varied – the nature and content of the education offered; the middle class image often portrayed; the fact that 'courses' and 'classes' are not part of the life style of most working class adults. Surprisingly little fundamental research has been undertaken into the question of adult education for the working class. In fact, those who advocate a concentration of research and action in this field are often accused of a misplaced sense of loyalty to the working class and the problem has been put down to apathy with the suggestion that little can be done about it.

In recent years, however, a great deal of research into the difficulties of working class children in primary and secondary schools has illustrated only too clearly the handicap under which these children suffer and the failure of the present educational system to cater for their particular needs. The apparent lack of interest in education on the part of working class adults can now be seen as a direct result of the education which they have – or have not received – during their early school years.

The Liverpool E P A Project is an attempt to do something about this problem at the primary school level. Emphasis is placed on the need to offer an education which is relevant to the needs of children in an EPA. An education which is rooted in the immediate environment in the hope that an intimate awareness of the environment will result in an atmosphere of 'constructive discontent' that will break the present vicious circle of poverty and deprivation.

However, it is recognised that this is a long term aim. This then throws a tremendous burden on the adult educationalist who must tackle the problem of educating those who have come through the system without benefiting from it. In fact it can be argued that his role is even more important than that of the schools because, even granted a dramatic alteration in the content and method of primary school education in E P A's, little real change will occur unless the parents are also involved in some process of educational change.

How to go about it is the problem. Traditional adult teaching methods and techniques have obviously failed and what is called for is a radical reappraisal

2

of the nature and structure of the adult education provision – or to be more correct, the lack of provision – in this vitally important field. In the absence of any guide-lines I believe that much can be learnt from:–

(i) The basic philosophic approach underlying the work of the Liverpool E P A Project (Occasional Papers No. 1 *Educational Priority Areas: The Philosophic Question)*

(ii) The new teaching methods and techniques employed in primary schools.

(iii) The experience of professional workers engaged in the expanding field of community development work here in Liverpool.

The Liverpool E P A philosophy rejects much that is taught in primary schools in working class areas. Basically the Project accepts that the great bulk of the curriculum in such schools is middle class oriented and totally irrelevant to the needs of the children. The fact that it is irrelevant is seen as the main reason for the failure of the schools to meet the challenge of adequately preparing children in E P A's for the difficulties they face once they leave school. It departs from the theme underlying the Plowden Report in its belief that a widening of the net to let a few more children through into the grammar schools or G C E streams will do nothing for the great majority of the children in E P A schools and may in fact exacerbate the situation.

Modern educational psychology emphasises the fact that the learning process is a response to our social environment, the need to communicate, to adapt our behaviour to accepted social norms in order to survive – children, for instance, learn to talk long before they enter school. In many primary schools the children need to feel that the curriculum is relevant because they come from a background where subjects like French and History are of no relevance in coping with the environment.

This is also true of children from middle class homes but they acquire basic social skills from their parents and emphasis is placed on learning certain subjects in order to get on in the educational system. This is not the case with the majority of working class children and thus a much wider responsibility for social education is placed on the schools. If the schools would accept this role then community and school would be more closely integrated, the latter acting as a power house for the former.

Put simply, education in E P A's should deal with real situations.

The other aspect of primary school education which is relevant to adult education in such areas is the emphasis on the 'discovery method', i.e. learning through doing. Children are placed in a learning situation where they can work the problem out for themselves and at the same time see the connection between what they are learning and the real world outside the school walls. In the adult education field this method is now gaining acceptance as the most appropriate technique in a wide range of teaching situations from the retraining of industrial personnel to traditional liberal studies such as economics.

The argument so far then is that education in an EPA should be relevant, grounded in real problems and situations, and, as far as teaching techniques is concerned, the emphasis should be on involvement and discovery. These criteria are equally applicable to adult education in an EPA. In fact, in the community development work in the Liverpool EPA these criteria are applied by the professional workers in the field, although it is doubtful if they see their work from an educational viewpoint. Basically, the community development workers are concerned to stimulate an interest in community problems amongst the adult population in their area: assist in the setting up of residents' groups and tenants' associations; offer such groups advice and information if and when it is required. The emphasis is very much on offering a service rather than imposing solutions. The field worker in fact takes a back seat leaving it to the group to learn through their own efforts and mistakes.

People are thus involved in a 'learning situation', dealing with problems which are seen as immediately relevant. Experience is broadened and vistas widened as residents come into contact – often for the first time – with corporation officials, elected representatives and the professional workers from the various social and welfare agencies. In this situation adults are strongly motivated to learn but in a very practical sense, i.e. as active participants rather than passive onlookers.

This may strike some as stating the obvious, i.e. that life itself is an education. Surprising though how often the obvious is ignored. This is particularly true of those who see all education in terms of a class, a course, an institution. In an EPA the educational problem for adults is one of restricted opportunities to 'learn from life' and what is needed is a widening of such opportunities. People living in these areas had little or no possibility of making their voice heard on the difficulties confronting them. Their area of choice is severely limited, whilst many outsiders are critical of their apparent apathy and inability to accept responsibility. Hardly surprising when one considers how seldom they are given the opportunity to choose, especially about such vitally important items as housing, schools, jobs, etc. and how limited is the responsibility they are asked to shoulder as rejects of the educational system.

In such a situation adult education must attempt to give back to the communities concerned a sense of confidence in their ability to choose and accept responsibility. In Liverpool there are a number of professional workers not normally regarded as adult educationalists who are doing just that, area community wardens employed by the education department; community development officers attached to community councils; community organisers from the Children's Department, unattached youth workers. They are, albeit possibly unknowingly, carrying out one of the main recommendations of the Plowden Report, i.e. to develop a sense of community involvement in EPA's.

As a Workers Educational Association Tutor/Organiser attached to the

Liverpool E P A Project my task is to find a role for the W E A in this vitally important field. How in fact can an organisation with its background of traditional adult education provision fit into the more flexible, informal adult education approach outlined above? Two examples of the sort of work I have been engaged in may help to answer this question and at the same time illustrate the points made about the importance of relevancy, practical involvement, and discovery techniques when dealing with the problem of education for adults in an E P A.

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(1) In the northern end of the city two of the Project schools are situated in close proximity to each other in an area of new high rise development. Here the difficulties facing the residents are not those of poor housing usually associated with an E P A but rather those connected with family isolation, lack of social amenities for adults and recreational activities for children. It is an area struggling to regain some sense of the old working class community spirit.

In between the two schools, stands the Salisbury Street Handicraft Centre, the property of the Education Department, no longer in use except for a section of the basement occupied by some local authority school maintenance workers. The local parish priest had succeeded in obtaining a lease from the education authority to use a small part of this large building as a centre for a pre-school playgroup. He and I both agreed that efforts should be made to utilise the rest of the building for wider community purposes. I was interested in the possibilities for some form of adult education, particularly for the parents of children attending the near-by schools, whilst he was concerned to provide some form of recreational activity for the children in the area. In the event both possibilities were realised but not in the manner we visualised.

I began by getting some of the mothers from one of the schools to agree to meet in the centre to discuss their contribution to the school magazine. We discussed the sort of topics they could write about and eventually, after a number of weeks, they produced some material which was duly published. These informal get-togethers continued for a number of months with the addition of some of the mothers with children in the pre-school play group.

Although I made various suggestions for something approaching a formal adult education course, with, for instance, visiting speakers on topics of interest, these suggestions were rejected. However, noting that a recurrent topic of conversation was the obvious lack of social amenities, I suggested that they consider using the Handicraft Centre as a community and social centre. During this period the composition of the group had altered and my suggestion was enthusiastically received.

In the following weeks some men joined the group and lengthy, often heated, discussions took place about the nature of the activities in the proposed community centre and the best method of enlisting local support. As far as the former was concerned the debate centred on the merits of having a centre with the emphasis on social/activities for adults as compared with a centre catering for young people and adults with the emphasis on the recreational and educational side. In the end the parents' natural concern for the young people in the area won the day and it was decided to concentrate initially on providing evening activities for the older children in the district.

Regarding the latter it was agreed to circularise the district inviting residents to a general meeting to elect a committee. Over forty people turned up for the meeting. A committee was duly elected and decisions made about the nature of the proposed activities for the children. In all this discussion and argument I played a background role offering advice when it was requested. For the first time the people concerned were given the opportunity to do something positive about some of the many problems they faced as residents in a new housing estate.

For them it was an education and, contrary to the views of many observers, they responded in a very positive manner to the challenge presented to them. In fact, their insistence on placing the welfare of the children above their own social needs was a striking rebuff to those who argue that parents in an E P A have little or no interest in their children's education.

If anything, the residents tried to do too much in a short period of time but I felt it was better they learnt from their own mistakes than have solutions imposed upon them. Within a period of four weeks they had organised a boxing club run by local residents with experience in this field; ran a dance – twice weekly – for the teenagers in the district; held a jumble sale to collect money to cover expenses; asked for my assistance in setting up a class in hairdressing for the mothers; met the local councillors to discuss problems facing residents in the area and affiliated to the local community council! They also made plans for a weekend camp for the children and a football competition for the local street teams.

The distinctive feature of this experiment in community involvement, cum adult education, is that it succeeds because of the initiative of the local people using *their* skills and experiences. For instance, the equipment for the boxing club was gathered from local clubs in Liverpool. Initially the music for the teenagers' dance was provided by a group living in the district, whilst the mothers provided the crockery and helped clean up the building.

The parents in the Salisbury Centre were being educated through 'doing'. Experiences had been widened and people educated through their involvement in an activity with a social purpose. They showed initiative, accepted responsibility, admitted the need for some form of action on their part to

solve the social and educational problems in their area. It was an exercise in informal adult education.

In the past few months the residents committee have sought my assistance in stimulating an awareness of wider community problems in their district. We have had a film show on the gulf that can be created between the citizens and the local authority in many large cities. An exhibition of plans for the area – provided by the City Planning Department – was held in the Salisbury Centre. Plans are afoot for informal pub discussions to create a wider interest in tackling the problems of vandalism and crime in the local community. The recent theft of a TV set from the centre led to discussions with the police and the juvenile liaison officer about the possibility of a closer working relationship between the police and the residents. I am not suggesting that stealing T V sets is a way of stimulating an interest in solving the crime problem in E P A's! It was the reaction of the residents' committee to the incident which was illuminating. Instead of just shrugging it off they made positive efforts to solve the general problem of crime in the area in consultation with the organisation responsible to the community for tackling such problems.

Given this sense of involvement, this learning situation, I hope to take the exercise a stage further in terms of adult education by offering informal courses to assist the residents in the work they have undertaken. Now that they have been engaged in running committees, meeting corporation officials and talking to the police they are beginning to realise that they lack certain basic skills and information. For instance, they need to know more about running committees, learning to express themselves adequately and acquiring details of the structure of the local authority and the various welfare agencies. Their experiences to date have given them a sense of motivation which they lacked in the past. This is an essential second stage in the process of education and leads me on naturally to a discussion of the other example of my work in this field.

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(2) The Salisbury Centre was an illustration of work with residents in which the emphasis was very much on doing something concrete and practical. Other residents' groups in the Liverpool E P A have passed through the same stage and have now reached a point where they are responsive to the suggestion that they tackle something of a slightly more formal educational nature. For instance, in the Granby area of Liverpool the Shelter Neighbourhood Action Project has succeeded in enlisting the support of local residents in a programme of participation in the planning field, i.e. making use of the provision of the 1969 Housing Act to apply for grants for property renewal and drawing up *their* plans for the area in consultation with Local Authority officials. Task

Forces composed of local residents were set up to examine particular problems in the area, i.e. housing, crime, education, traffic, services, etc. I was brought in to assist with the setting up of this participation structure and to advise on the best methods of explaining complicated town planning jargon to the local people involved.

The Local Authority has now accepted the residents' proposals and declared the area a general improvement area. Here again people were involved in an exercise of an informal adult educational nature. For the first time they were asked to discuss *their* plans for their environment. The various task forces engaged in lengthy discussions with Corporation officials and other experts about real problems. Now that their report has been accepted the S N A P team of professional advisers has made it clear that it is up to the residents to take over responsibility for communicating with the Local Authority about the work to be done in their community.

The residents are now willing to accept my suggestion that they take part in an informal course to assist them with their committee work, develop their communication skills, and explain the structure of the Local Authority. They became acutely conscious of their lack of experience and ability in these fields when I was asked to sit in on one of their meetings to discuss how they proposed to tackle the Director of Housing when he came to talk about delays in implementing certain of their proposals for the area. It was an exercise in role playing but dealing with real situations. I had to advise them on correct committee procedure and on the best methods of presenting their case. I was then able to put it to them that in fact they needed some sort of training and they agreed because the evening's proceedings had brought this point home to all concerned. Recognition of needs came through involvement and motivation was heightened.

The sort of informal adult education I have been describing presents real but not insurmountable problems for the Workers' Educational Association. The fact that a number of community workers are engaged in work similar to that I was involved in with the Salisbury group would seem to present a problem of conflict of roles. However, working for a voluntary body such as the W E A gives one certain advantages. For instance, during the period when the activities I described took place the residents were more or less 'squatters' since the Corporation had not given official permission to use the building for any purpose other than the activities connected with the pre-school play group. Permission has now been granted on the evidence of the fact that the building fulfills a real need in the community and that the residents have shown both their desire and ability to make use of it. This might have proved difficult for a community worker employed by the local authority who would have found himself at odds with his employer. So a W E A tutor-organiser could undertake this type of work although the present system of grant aid for

the WEA would need to be altered to lay less stress on the provision of classes or courses.

This difficulty would not be so acute if the W E A concentrated on the provision at the second stage of the informal adult education structure I have outlined. However, I doubt if such a role could be carried out effectively without the tutor concerned becoming involved in the first stage and working closely with the other professionals in the field. Community development is still in its early stages and much remains to be done to clarify the roles of all those engaged in work of this nature. The W E A clearly has a role but it is much too early to decide to confine its function to one particular aspect of the work.

Efforts are being made by people like Keith Jackson of the Liverpool University Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies to give some rationale to the whole process and particularly to establish a clear role for adult education but this will take some time. The fact that he, the W E A and EPA Project are working closely together on this problem foretells well for the future of adult education in this field. Such co-operation brings together experts in the various spheres mentioned at the beginning of this paper, i.e. primary education, adult education and community development. I feel certain that only through such a cross fertilisation of ideas from people in interrelated fields can the problem of adult education for working class communities be successfully tackled.

Occasional Papers

First series: Numbers 1 to 5. This series Numbers 6 to 10
See *Projectile 4* for further details

The Liverpool Educational Priority Area Project is one of a number of national-mounted action-research attempts to find ways of improving the educational life of socially deprived areas. During the two years remaining to the project, it is intended to publish occasional papers dealing with matters related to the team's work. They will vary greatly from considerations of basic principles involved to accounts of actual action. The intention is, in a small way, to keep the E.P.A. issue in the educational mind's eye and to focus attention on possible means of meeting aspects of the problem.

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